

Bidi barons lock horns in elections in West Bengal's Murshidabad and Malda

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Several bidi industrialists and those associated with this industry have over the years joined politics and have contested elections in West Bengal's Murshidabad and Malda districts. Many are sitting lawmakers now



With more than a million bidi workers living in West Bengal's Murshidabad and Malda districts, their influence on the vote bank is undeniable there. (HT Photo)

It was just around 9am and work was going on in full swing at the factory of a popular bidi-brand near the Dak Bangla crossing at Dhuliyān in West Bengal's Murshidabad district. Sitting in the shade of a long verandah inside the factory, dozens of men could be seen arranging bidis in bundles before stacking them in neat concentric rings in the bamboo-baskets kept in front of them. As the labourers remained engrossed in their work, an elderly man with grey hair and white beard took a leisurely stroll in the courtyard, while keeping a watch on the workers.

“The bidi-making industry is concentrated in this part of West Bengal. Most of the top brands of the bidi-making industry are located at Dhulian and Aurangabad, both in Murshidabad district,” said Zaidur Rahaman, director of Nur Bidi Works Pvt Ltd, which produces around 10 million bidis every day.

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His twin brother Khalilur Rahaman is the managing director (MD) of the company and the Trinamool Congress (TMC)’s sitting member of Parliament (MP) from Jangipur in Murshidabad district. Khalilur is also the TMC’s Lok Sabha candidate from the constituency.

Constituency-wise, while Dhulian is a part of Malda South Lok Sabha seat, Aurangabad comes under Jangipur Lok Sabha seat in Murshudabad. The two constituencies go into

“With more than a million bidi workers living in these two constituencies, their influence on the vote bank is undeniable. They are a big factor, primarily in Jangipur. So, when it comes to elections, no political parties can ignore the bidi workers,” said Mozaffar Hossain, joint secretary of the Bidi Mazdoor and Packers’ Union in Murshidabad.

This huge workforce forms a major chunk of the voters in at least five of the seven assembly seats under Jangipur Lok Sabha seat - Suti, Jangipur, Raghunathganj, Sagardighi and Lalgola. Their influence is also undeniable in an equal number of constituencies in Malda South, including Samserganj, Farakka, Sujapur, Baishnabnagar and Manikchak.

HT POLL

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- ☐ Delhi
- ☐ Mumbai
- ☐ Bengaluru

Both Jangipur and Malda South have been Congress strongholds for long. Former President Pranab Mukherjee had been a two-time MP from Jangipur seat after getting elected to the Lok Sabha for the first time in 2004 and then

again in 2009. In 2014 his son Abhijeet Mukherjee also got elected from here. In 2019, however, the tables turned and the TMC's Khalilur Rahaman, a bidi baron, won the seat. The Congress is yet to hold its sway in Malda South.

"Several bidi industrialists and those associated with this industry have over the years joined politics and have contested elections. Many are sitting lawmakers now," said Manirul Islam, TMC MLA from Farakka in Malda South Lok Sabha, who manufactures and supplies bidis to two brands.

While Khalilur Rahaman is the TMC's incumbent MP and party's candidate this election, several other bidi industrialists are the party's sitting MLAs - Jakir Hossain, TMC MLA of Jangipur, Bayron Biswas, TMC MLA of Sagardighi and Emani Biswas, TMC MLA of Suti, are all bidi industrialists.

"Bidi barons contesting elections is a new phenomenon. It started around the year 2009. Earlier we never saw any bidi industrialist contesting elections themselves even though they had backed political party candidates from behind the wings. But now we have multiple lawmakers who are bidi industrialists and many others who contested the elections but lost," said Raj Kumar Jain, general secretary, Bidi Merchant's Association at Aurangabad-Dhulian in Murshidabad.

This year too at least two bidi industrialists, including the TMC's sitting MP Khalilur Rahaman are contesting the Lok Sabha elections while an independent candidate has been fielded by a bidi baron. Shahjahan Biswas, who owns the Howrah bidi-brand, is contesting with an Indian Secular Front (ISF) ticket. Asadul Biswas, relative of TMC legislator Bayron Biswas, is also contesting as an independent candidate with the support of a bidi industrialist.

"Many of the bidi industrialists are into social work. Like I have seen my father (Nur Mohammad Biswas, a former bidi baron) doing a lot of social work, and got inspired by him. The Nur family has set up multiple schools and health centres. Hence many of them come to politics to serve the people," said Khalilur Rahaman, bidi industrialist and MP when asked about the trend of bidi barons coming to electoral politics.

Locals said that while on one hand huge amounts of money, mostly liquid cash, are involved in this trade, he who wins the polls will have control over the industry. Rival bidi barons often field independent candidates to eat away the vote share of a prospective candidate.

In January 2023 the Income Tax department seized around ₹10.9 crore cash from TMC MLA Jakir Hossain's office in Murshidabad. TMC leaders had maintained that as Hossain owns the Shiv bidi brand, he had to keep cash to make payments to the workers.

"The bidi workers form a huge chunk of the voters in Jangipuir and Malda South. It is not easy to win without their support. Even though promises galore before every poll, they become a forgotten lot after the elections are over," said Asadul Biswas, an independent candidate.

In February this year Congress leader Rahul Gandhi made an unscheduled stop at Madhupur village of Suti in Murshidabad to speak with women bidi-makers.

Bidi-rollers continue to live in poverty



The women, girls and sometimes even the elderly men are the main work force in the bidi-rolling. (HT Photo)

Last year, ahead of the Sagardighi bye-election in February 2023, which the TMC won, the party's national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee had promised that after the elections the wages of bidi-workers would be hiked.

But even as industrialists lock horns, the bidi-rollers continue to live in poverty with promises flowing in abundance before every election.

At Nutan Chandra village in Suti, around 12 km away from the Nur Bidi factory in Dhuliyān, Rahima Bibi was busy rolling bidis while sitting on the road in front of her thatched hut along with three other village women. They work in silence, their practiced fingers rolling the fine powder into beedis.

"If we manage to roll 1,000 bidis a day, we get ₹178. But it is hard to roll more than 700 – 800 bidis a day. After working for more than 16 hours a day, your body will start aching. The dust from tobacco will trigger respiratory problems. How do you think one can manage with a wage of just around ₹100 –

₹120 per day when the cost of everyday items, including medicines, are going up,” she said.

Malda and Murshidabad, both share their borders with Bangladesh and both are Muslim dominated districts. According to the 2011 census, Muslim population comprises 51.2% of Malda’s population and 66.2% of Murshidabad’s population.

“The bidi workers are frustrated with the TMC government. They are not getting their dues. Many of the bidi industrialists are TMC leaders. This time they will vote for the BJP, I am sure. Even the hospital for bidi workers at Tarapur in Dhuliyan is at its death bed,” said Dhananjay Ghosh, BJP candidate of Jangipur, who is a contractor and runs a business.

While the village-men leave for other districts, the women and children stay back in these villages of bidi-belt of Murdshidabad and Malda districts. The women, girls and sometimes even the elderly men are the main work force in the bidi-rolling. The factories, where the final products are roasted and packed before being loaded on trucks, engage mostly men.

Women workforce



With elections at the doorsteps, these villages and towns in the bidi-belt have once again become a political battleground (HT Photo)

“Women comprise around 70% of the bidi-industry’s workforce. With a Muslim majority and a women-dominated work force, this industry is a major vote bank of the ruling TMC in West Bengal,” said Hamidul Islam, a school teacher in Samserganj.

With elections at the doorsteps, these villages and towns in the bidi-belt have once again become the political battleground of almost every party and independent candidate. Political flags and posters with the usual pictures

of candidates standing with folded hands seeking votes have come up almost everywhere.

“Elections come and go. Before the election the political leaders come and seek votes. But after they win or lose, they hardly return to the village. We remain in the same darkness and poverty. None of the promises are kept,” said Lucy Khatun, whose husband is a migrant worker in Odisha.

But with time the political equations are changing fast in this bidi town. While on one hand factions within the TMC are surfacing, the ISF has fielded a candidate in Jangipur, which may eat up a sizeable chunk of the TMC’s vote share.

While Khalilur Rahaman is the TMC’s sitting MP and candidate, Shahjahan Biswas, who is fighting with an ISF ticket, is the brother of Emani Biswas, TMC MLA from Suti. Also, independent candidate Asadul Biwas has been pitted against Khalilur. Asadul is the cousin of Bayron Biswas, TMC MLA from Sagardighi.

“Inshallah we will win this time too,” said Khalilur Rahaman.

While bidi barons fight over this constituency, it is the poor bidi workers who play a major role in deciding their fate.

“Every year we get to hear many promises. But after the elections are over the leaders vansih along with the promises. They come again after five years. This goes on. It will happen this year again and we will vote with a lot of hopes knowing that there would be hardly any change,” said Taraful Bibi, a resident of Dhuliyan.



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